No. 28. An earnest exhortation to attend public worship.

For a Country Congregation.

Psalm 122, 1st Verse.

I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.

To neglect the public worship of Almighty God is now become so very common that many men, no doubt, imagine themselves excused from the obligation. One Sunday succeeds another, and we perceive a growing inattention, an increasing unconcern about publicly supplicating the blessing of God. Many men have so habituated themselves to this shameful absence from the house of God, that one might conclude they have entered into covenant with God, and that to make a public acknowlegement of His power in prayer, and to offer Him the public tribute of praise and thanksgiving is no longer to constitute a part of their duty. It is not to such men I shall now address myself; for as they do not attend Church, what is here delivered can be of no

ſervice to them—but my diſcourſe will be to thoſe who attend occaſionally. And obſerving the congregation rather larger than uſual, and therefore compoſed chiefly of thoſe who do not regularly frequent the courts of the Lord's houſe, I cannot have a more favourable opportunity to beſeech you publicly, my brethren, in the name of God, and for the ſake of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt, that ye will from this day devote the Sunday to the holy purpoſe for which God Almighty deſigned it; that ye will from this day invariably attend public worſhip; and that inſtead of loitering in idleneſs at home, or wandering about in miſchief abroad during the time of divine ſervice, ye will "pay your vows in the great "congregation," and ſay from your hearts, with the devout Pſalmiſt, I was, &c.

In this diſcourſe I ſhall firſt ſhew the obligations incumbent on every perſon without exception to attend the public worſhip of God every Sunday.

After which I ſhall remove the excuſes made for the neglect of it.

And lastly I shall earnestly exhort you to worship God as regularly as the Sunday comes, "in this house "which is called by His name". May the blessing of God accompany what is delivered! And may this house, dedicated to God, be distinguished every succeeding Sunday by the regular and constant attendance of every individual whom God requires to be in it!

1st. It has always been the object of every Govern= ment to inculcate upon the people religious principles; well knowing that if the fear of God be not implanted in the heart, men would never be restrained by a sense of right, a principle of duty, or the terror of law. And for what end are churches built and ministers appointed? Surely that the ignorant may be instructed in, and the more intelligent reminded of, their duty both to God, their neighbour, and themselves. The Le= gislature conceiving it the indispensible duty of every one to attend public worship, has imposed a fine upon all who neglect it. Nothing, I believe, would be more unwillingly paid; but it is devoutly to be wished that

it were invariably exacted. The character of an informer is generally accounted odious; on this occasion it would cease to be such.

A second obligation to attend divine worship is, that it is the only mode of conveying and receiving instruction. We are more devout, we are more serious, we feel stronger impressions of Religion by supplicating God in the church than we can do in private; for a devout congregation is an emblem of Heaven. Those indeed who are religiously disposed may derive much edification from joining in prayer regularly with their families—from offering up their private devotions to God—and from frequently reading the holy Scriptures. But the church is the only place where we can be exhorted to the observance of those duties we neglect, and dissuaded from the commission of vices to which we are addicted. For instance: the man who does not attend the church does not of consequence receive the Sacrament. Now by this neglect he does not hear his objections to the celebration of the Lord's Supper removed; he hears

no exhortations to the observance of this duty; and he becomes at last almost insensible that Jesus Christ, the very night on which He suffered death to redeem us, expressly commanded it. Is a man addicted to intemperance, to swearing, to excessive passion—by not going to church he does not hear the folly of his vices exposed; he does not hear the denunciations of God Almighty "against those who commit such things" denounced; and therefore continues in the indulgence of them till he goes down to the grave with all his sins unrepented of on his head. Consider, on the other hand, the happy effects of a regular attendance on the church. A suitable discourse, by God's blessing attending it, may be a mean of convincing a sinner of the error of his ways, of leading him to amendment of life, and of making his peace both with God and man. "The word preached may and does profit" in a variety of instances. How many thoughtless wretches who consumed their time, and squandered their substance, have become diligent and careful? How

many, who behaved like brutes and savages to their families, by hearing the word of God, have become docile and peaceable? Now if such advantages arise from a regular and constant attendance on the church, is it not every man's duty to be constant in his attendance? "I speak as to wise men, judge ye," my brethren, and determine on the propriety of it.

The last obligation I shall mention incumbent on all men to celebrate the public worship of God, is the express command so repeatedly and emphatically delivered in the holy Scriptures.

It is to be observed that the command is no way qualified by leaving it to our own discretion whether we will come to Church or not. God's house is the place appointed where we are to receive instruction, to offer up prayers, and to give thanks unto God. God commanded "the children of Israel, their wives, and "their little ones, and the stranger within their gates, "to assemble that they might hear, and that they might "learn and fear the Lord their God, and observe to do

"all the words of His law: and that their children "too might hear, and learn to fear the Lord their "God." What attention did they pay to God's command? "There was not a word of all that Moses "commanded which Joshua read not before ALL "the congregation of Israel with the women and the "little ones, and the strangers that were conversant "among them." Let any man take a view of this congregation in general, and could he suppose that God Almighty had given a command that every soul throughout the parish, who was not prevented by sickness or unavoidable necessity, should pay their adoration to Him in His own house? "When God judges "the world in righteousness," may none of you, my brethren, experience the indignation He will shew to those who have neglected His worship! God requires and commands you to appear every Sunday in this house of prayer. Instead of which you come when you have no engagement, and just as you feel disposed. Do you ever consider by Whom the command is given?

Is there a man amongst you who would pay the same inattention to the request of him of whom you rent a farm or derive your subsistence? To leave you without excuse—to represent you to yourselves as ungrateful and disobedient, as indeed you are, to the God who created, and redeemed you, I shall obviate the pleas with which you so easily satisfy yourselves.

(1) You have business you alledge, and you cannot, for the sake of coming to Church, neglect it. It may be so. To whom are you indebted for the means of business? To God, you will say—no doubt. And what command has He given respecting it? "The "seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God; on "it thou shalt do no manner of work." If business requires you to absent yourselves so very often from church you had better have no business—you had better be in the lowest station in life, with just bread to eat and raiment to put on, than have engagements which prevent your worshipping God. Business is to supply you with the comforts and conveniences of this life.

Religion is to secure your happiness to all eternity. Ask your hearts whether you prefer?

(2) It is sometimes impiously said, where is the necessity of going to church, when we observe many people no better than ourselves who have gone all their lives? "Their blood be on their own heads! To their "own Master they stand or fall;" and to Him must they give account for all the means of improvement, and answer for their neglect. Will it render the punishment of eternity easier to bear, because you do not bear your punishment alone? We have enough to do to take care of our own souls, let us not intermeddle with others, unless we can improve them in goodness.

(3) It is sometimes alledged your clothes are so indifferent you are ashamed of coming to church. In answer to this——will you be seen by any body who is not acquainted with your situation and circumstances? But it may be often asked, with too much propriety, of those who make such excuse; is it not in your power

to provide better? Do you not spend so much money in drinking, or so much time in idleness, as, if you were employed in your business, would supply you with clothes suitable to your station? If you are careful and industrious, be not ashamed. It is not improbable but that some people, observing your regularity and devotion, may charitably supply you with some. But if they should not, you had better worship God and save your souls, than lose them eternally under the pretence of not having so good clothes as your neighbors.

(4) Some people pretend to excuse their neglect of the church because they are ignorant, and they shall not, they hope, be punished for their want of knowledge. One would think it almost impossible that any man should pass such a gross imposition on himself. Is the Gospel so uninteresting that we may live in wilful ignorance of it? If there be any thing in the world a man should be desirous of knowing, it is surely the way to Heaven. Would you not wish to have some greater certainty of your salvation than the mere hope

that you shall not be damned because you would not know your duty, under the pretence that you should thereby be excused from the practice of it?

(5) Another excuse made for not attending church by some people is, that they can read the Scriptures and good books at home. Now I appeal to your conscience before God, in whose more immediate presence we all are at this moment, whether you are, on the Lord's day, so profitably employed? Your conscience, I presume, tells you that you are not. But to convince you that it is your duty to attend the church, I will suppose you guilty of some vice——swearing, for instance.——Now whilst you have been reading, as you pretend, at home, a discourse has been publicly delivered by the Minister, which remarkably affects your case and circumstances. Had you heard it, you might have thought on the dangerous state you were in with respect to Almighty God; you might have determined to reform your life; and to cease from so absurd and sinful a practice. But is it likely you

ſhould read at home what muſt fill you with ſhame and ſtrike you with ſelf-condemnation? Beſides, were every one to make the ſame excuſe, churches would be quite unneceſſary, and the whole body of the Clergy almoſt, would be a burthen upon ſociety; as their entire employ would be the baptizing infants, viſiting the ſick and burijing the dead. Sunday, that bleſsed day appointed for the celebration of our Redemption by Chriſt, would ceaſe to be beneficial—the conſequence of which would ſhortly be, that we ſhould live without ſacraments, without piety, "and without God in the world." For the profanation of the day which God has commanded to be kept holy, you who neglect the church are anſwerable.

(6) The laſt excuſe I ſhall at preſent mention is, that the apprehenſion of catching cold, and the badneſs of the weather, often prevent many people, they pretend, from attending the ſervice of God, who are ſorry to be hindered from it.

Perſons of delicate conſtitutions, and thoſe afflicted

with any severe complaints, may justly make the excuse. But "be not deceived;" do not impose on yourselves. Is not your health often endangered by cold and rain in the prosecution of your business or the enjoyment of your pleasures? We need not argue on this subject; God is the Judge. You may alledge many things in vindication of your neglect of public worship. But be well assured that your excuses are such as you shall not be ashamed or afraid to offer at God's Tribunal. When you absent yourselves from church, are you neither withheld by inclination nor diverted by amusements?

Nothing now remains but that I briefly expostulate with you for presuming to devote the part of the Sunday to your own pursuits, which should be spent in the public worship of Almighty God.

Of every soul committed to his care the minister of the Gospel must give account to God. To observe you therefore, my Brethren, when you should be attending public worship—some pursuing your pleasures,

some engaged in business—some indulging in idleness—and some immersed in dissipation, awakens in my breast sensations of the most piercing nature, and enkindles in my heart apprehensions the most alarming. When the Sunday comes, and the Bells warn you that "the day is the Lord's," consider that you are then called by the great God of Heaven and Earth; that He expects you to attend Him in His own house; and that if you are remiss and negligent, you shall provoke His heavy displeasure. Do not attempt to satisfy your conscience by pretending some little engagement or trifling business. The Almighty admits of no business to detain you from His worship. Would you be satisfied if your own commands were neglected through such trivial pretences? We lament that the Heathens had no Sunday, no set day on which they might worship God. And we make ourselves worse than the Heathens, because, having such a day, we despise and defile it. Represent to your minds the awful season when you shall

be visited with sickness and arrested by death; and ask yourselves if you think your consciences will signify their approbation of your having been only occasional worshippers of God? Do you think you shall derive any pleasure in that awful hour from the reflection that you have spent so many Sundays, emphatically called God's own days, in idleness, in business, or in pleasures? Ah soon, too soon it may be! will that time arrive. And should I be called on to attend you in those agonizing moments, if I am not successful in my attempt, to persuade you from this day to attend public worship, every page of the Bible will forbid me to give you encouragement to expect Salvation. Consider how deplorable such a state will be, and may God give you Grace to prevent it!

Theophs. J. St. John.

Entered at Stationers' Hall.